Social and Musical Effects of Co-writing

Performing and analyzing six co-writes

Written reflection within independent master thesis
Abstract

This study examines social factors in songwriting collaborations with the aim to understand the inner workings of co-writes. Previous research indicates significant benefits with songwriting collaborations, both related to productivity and creativity (e.g. Bennett 2012, Littleton & Mercer, 2012). Nonetheless, it can be creatively frustrating to make music in a collaboration that does not work like expected. What is significant about the musical work in a fulfilling co-write? And how can you find your way out of struggle together? While there is qualitative research on musical collaborations, this study is distinguished by that the researcher is partaking in several co-writes. Six collaborations were documented with various methods, including video and audio recordings, post-hoc reflection, semi-structured interviews and communication memos. The comprised material was transcribed and analyzed in order to reveal socio-musical tendencies in the co-writes.

The research suggests four socio-musical categories for explaining actions in co-writing sessions – 'Artistic Concept', 'Concept', 'Meta' and 'External'. The two first categories are more artistically connoted, where the last two are more socially signified. During the study, purely artistic actions were outweighed by more socially connoted actions in the co-writes. This resulted in a fairly low generation of musical material per session. The prevalence of bonding may be seen as a way of avoiding rejection, which is a possible outcome when suggesting musical ideas (Bennett, 2012). The sessions that were most fulfilling for the researcher were characterized of nonverbal, musical means rather than linguistic ones - where the collaborators didn’t talk about the music, but connected through songwriting. High rates of fulfillment connected to musical communication was also supported by numerous co-writers in the project.

Keywords: co-write, songwriting, collaboration

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Introduction

Co-writing has always been a hot topic between songwriters and music producers in my experience. For some creators it is an indispensable part of their musical profession, especially within popular music genres, but for some the concept of co-writing is fearsome and anxiety-inducing. Perhaps people thrive in musical collaborations more often than not, but sometimes co-writes can leave creators frustrated and creatively inhibited. It is true that individual’s best but also worst experiences have to do with relationships to other people (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and I believe that there is reason to believe that this notion extends to musical activities as well.

I myself have extremely arbitrary experiences of co-writing. Some of my best musical work have been conducted in collaborations, where seeds of congeniality have flourished into majestic musical bouquets without any experienced effort. The sense that there is something magical(ish) with music has been especially tangible in co-writes. On the flipside, I have experienced co-writes where I have been close to emotionally breaking down. This has sometimes had to do with overwhelming performance anxiety, which in turn leads to zero musical fulfillment. These processes have been frustrating, awkward, and close to socially traumatizing.

The seemingly contradictory nature of my relationship with co-writing is the impetus for this research project; I seek to illuminate mechanisms and tendencies that either drive collaborations towards fulfilling or creatively inhibiting destinations, and to explore the ‘quasi-social’ nature of co-writing (Bennett, 2012). Furthermore, the research aims to discover ways to enhance and bring forth the virtues and joys of collaboration, and to restrain the possible drawbacks of co-writing.

Purpose and research goals

A co-write consists of so many components. Notably, a co-write is a musical, artistic and technical situation - but it is also cloaked in a more or less evident social weave. I strongly feel that the social aspects of co-writing permeate the process - from musical ideas to the choice of mastering plug-ins. Conversely, I have no consistent knowledge of how these social aspects influence the artistic process. To reveal social tendencies in co-writes and how they interact with the music, one can gain knowledge of an important and meaningful dimension of
their work. The purpose of the research is to, with new information in hand, be able to enhance musical fulfillment and personal well-being in everyday musical work within co-writing. Since I note that social features can merge with artistic aspects in musical work, revealing the social processes can hopefully illuminate a part of the musical process and provide useful insights.

My research questions are the following:

- How does social aspects interact with musical activities in the co-writes?
- How can I enhance co-writes in terms of personal well-being and musical fulfillment?

Furthermore, my research goals are to:

- Reveal socio-musical tendencies and behaviour in co-writing,
- Delineate possible benefits and drawbacks with co-writing,
- Discuss methods to handle difficulties in co-writing and to utilize the virtues of co-writing.

Background and previous research

This section displays relevant perspectives, research and theories for my project. First, social and methodological perspectives on music production are presented, and subsequent research connotes collaborative and creative work in general.

Social and methodological perspectives on music production and songwriting

The ability to write music in a collaborative setting seems to be an essential part of the modern songwriter’s and music producer’s toolkit. To work as a music producer and songwriter very often implies operating in different social environments. As long as one not does everything in a production from start to end, there can be many technicians, songwriters and musicians in rotation before a production can be regarded as finished (McIntyre, 2012). To as a producer be able to negotiate ideas and combine different musical material in to a finalized product is both a social and musical challenge. As a team songwriter and producer, to be able to understand your fellow collaborators and to display empathy is a crucial part of
the process (McIntyre, 2012). The songwriter and music production professions are not just technically and artistically connotated, they also contain a social dimension. Out of the seven areas of competence that Jan-Olof Gullö (2010) deems to be essential for music producers, four of them are more socially than musically connotated.

As a precursor to conducting the experiments in my project, I interviewed three songwriters/music producers with professional experience about the social aspects of session co-writing. They all pointed to the richness of social actions as an integral part in many of their collaborations. One interviewee described the socialization before the session as a deliberate process in favor of the songwriting - to be able to find common ground socially, which in turn can create artistic connection: “Everyone in the room is aware that the ‘hanging out’ part of the session is a preparation for what is to come”. The same producer further explains that “[...] especially in cases where you don’t know one another that well, we often give room for people to show their personalities. This gives everyone valuable information for the work in the session”. The social bonding seems like a way for participants to align their identities in favor of the creative process.

My interview objects all witness that their best collaborations are characterized of an openness and acceptance in the sessions. One participant describes that shared musical preferences can be a gateway to openness: “My best co-writes has been with open-minded persons that I’ve musically ‘clicked’ with. When you know you’re on the same level, you can just go for it”. One of the interviewees indicates that when a co-write is at its best, the social relationship can be almost self-effacing and be replaced with a purely musical relationship between participants: “In my best co-writes, the processes have essentially been intuitive. We haven’t started from a clear concept, but have collectively just felt what the song will come to be, without discussion or talking. Although we’re improvising, our ideas just blend incredibly well.” In these cases, when the songwriters have experienced the biggest satisfaction in co-write sessions, they have communicated solely through musicking (as defined by Small, 1998).

As noted by Frith & Zagorksi-Thomas (2012), every technical action in a musical context has an artistic consequence, and every artistic movement has a technical consequence. For instance, if you distort a signal on a sound interface by gaining the signal, that will give rise to

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1 By my definition, co-writing consists of musical face-to-face collaboration, where one session usually results in a song draft which is later reviewed, developed and produced.
a certain feeling in the music. The technical action results in an aesthetic twist. By contrast, if you start out with the artistic inclination to want something to sound big, maybe the technical realization of that vision will be to add reverb, widen the stereo image, or using recordings of large sound stimuli (for instance a field recording of an avalanche).

With support of research cited above, my interview material and my own experiences of co-writing, there seems to be a prevalent social dimension in addition to artistic and technical qualities in music production and songwriting. Social impulses and urges can give fuel to create music, and in turn, the artistic intentions and technical actions have social consequences. For instance, an artistic idea is communicated - say I want to create a song that sounds like ten thousand squirrels gnawing on a spaceship. This can give rise to social reactions of laughter, scepticism or applause from my co-creator. These reactions will add to the messy concoction that is the creative process - and influence further actions in the session. Of course, it can be hard or impossible to fully distinguish social from artistic actions, but to at least acknowledge and explore the social dimension of co-writing and its implications is to cover new research territory. It also seems likely that the social dimension of the music creation process is more salient in co-writes than in individual songwriting.

In popular music, co-writing is a common and highly regarded method. Between 1955-2009, half of the Billboard hits were created in songwriting teams (Pettijohn & Ahmed), and these teams usually consisted of two people. Different songwriters and artists have incentives to merge if they believe that their shared work will result in commercial or artistic success (Bennett, 2012). The outcome of the work is highly speculative - it is impossible to know whether the song in question will be a hit or not. The choice of collaborators involve many aspects from musical track record, shared artistic preferences (Bennett, 2012) but also social matchmaking. The importance of social chemistry is noted in discussions of co-writes, but songwriter Jason Blume (2008) also highlight the search for quite ambitious collaborations - where the parties can challenge and inspire each other to become the best instances of themselves.

So, how do songwriters work? Joe Bennett has listed seven possible and used methods in popular music co-writes, for example ‘Nashville co-writing’ (face-to-face writing with instruments and vocals, usually under simple conditions) and ‘Svengali co-writing’ (artist meets experienced songwriter/producer who tries to capture the artist’s vision). Bennett also presents a model of ‘stimulus evaluation’ in co-writes - an attempt to describe some aspects of songwriting processes:
The ‘stimulus’ amounts to a musical suggestion or action by one of the co-writers, which is evaluated in light of several factors. This model can scale to different levels in the process - for instance, one musical stimulus can be a whole chorus which is evaluated in the end of a session, and another musical stimulus can be a synth preset. This interplay - recurring judgements and discussions in contrast to pure musical brainstorming can be fundamental to the co-writing process. Consensus often need to be articulated linguistically in co-writes in order to progress with the work. These points of evaluation can be especially observable in collaborations, whereas in solitary composition, the decision-making can be shrouded in a non-linear modus operandi where the approval or dismissal of ideas are barely noticed by the creator.

**Creative collaboration and groups**

Previous research indicates significant benefits with musical collaborations, both related to productivity and creativity (e. g. Bennett, 2012, Littleton & Mercer, 2012). To combine
expertise into a product that neither of the involved parties could have done on their own, and at the same time speed up the creative process is clearly appealing. With references from two or more composers’ musical universes, there seems to be many more combinations of ideas that could result in originality, in contrast to what one person’s mind could produce. And with well-disposed joint effort, for instance by utilizing different expertise, the productivity should be high. Songwriters Aleena Gibson, Fredrik Kempe and Eva Hillered all draw on the value of utilizing different expertise into a conjoined result (Hillered, 2013). The microbiologist Lennart Philipson argues that creativity is to be sought in groups, since the active involvement of several participants leads to greater in creativity than the sum of all individual performances in the group (Philipson, 1990). If a creative atmosphere is established, ideas can ricochet between collaborators towards a solution to a problem. The creative atmosphere can correlate with encouraging and open attitudes - this is accentuated by lyricist Pat Pattison (2010) who wants the songwriting room to be a ‘no-free zone’. Malcolm Gladwell’s descriptions of the practice of improvisation theatre follows the same maxim - the affirmation of artistic acts as an indispensable part of the artform (Gladwell, 2006).

Researcher Lars Svedberg suggests two different dimensions in a group - the work and relationship dimensions (Svedberg, 1997). The work dimension poses the question “how important are the goals, effectiveness and results?”, and the relationship dimension asks questions of individual well-being - aside from work, how important are the people? These notions may seem trivial, but countless problems with collaborative work can be understood through this dichotomy. For instance, many modern companies have provided a wide range of well-being enhancers for their employees, including video games at the office, free access to snacks and regularly occurring after-work quizzes. This focus on the relationship dimension in the group can also correlate with greater creativity, productivity and loyalty.

There are also possible downsides with creative collaboration. By one account, the impulse to achieve consensus in a group can be said to create rudimentary results (Janis, 1982). Perhaps contradictory to a common notion of brainstorming, idea-generating activities like these can be carried out more effectively individually rather than collectively (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987). The psychologist Carl G. Jung famously said that “when a hundred intelligent heads are united in a group the result is one big fathead, because every individual is inhibited by the fact that everyone else is different”.

Social stress can also be present in collaborations. A social-evaluative threat can be experienced in “a context in which the self can be negatively judged by others” (Aziz et al,
2009) which may include co-writes. High evaluative contexts seem to be creatively inhibiting in contrast to low evaluative environments (Byron et al, 2010).

**Briefly on psychic entropy, randomness and creativity**

Entropy is a term in physics, and a central part of the second law of thermodynamics (Frigg & Werndl, 2010). The term has been adopted in different disciplines - for instance, in statistical mechanics entropy is a measure of a system’s probability of entering a certain state, and the term is often used to describe degrees of order in a system. For instance, imagine a 2 km long straight sidewalk with orderly placed trash cans every 20th meter. The entirety of the sidewalk can be described by total length (2 km), direction (straight) and the interval between trash cans (20 meters). This sidewalk has relatively low entropy, because very little information is sufficient to create a useful understanding of the sidewalk. Now picture that the same sidewalk has been subject to a horde of hooligans, and some of the trash cans have been randomly destroyed. In fact, after the onslaught, there is no recurring pattern of trash cans at all at the sidewalk. Now the entropy is significantly higher - to describe the positioning of trash cans, we have to mention every single trash can instead of referring to a pattern. The more information it takes to describe a system, the higher entropy it has.

Now you might wonder - why is this esoteric nitty-gritty relevant for songwriting and creativity? The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has adopted the term into his notion of *psychic entropy*. He describes that when the mind is disorganized, we’re hindered from achieving our goals. The disorganization can consist of information that enters the mind which is incompatible with and unnecessary for the task that is desired to be completed. If you’re holding a lecture and strongly sense that you left the stove on and can’t stop worrying about it, the worrying is likely to disrupt your ability to perform the lecture as well as you could have. In a mind with low psychic entropy, your focus and interpretation of information is aligned with the task which you desire to perform. In this perfect alignment, flow can occur - a state of total awareness where everything seems to fall in just the right place, without much experienced effort. This is strongly related to creative activity, and the description of flow greatly resembles that of my interviewees’ best experiences in co-writing.

Although order and alignment seem like precursors to mental well-being, philosopher Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2012) points to the natural occurrence of randomness as an indispensable part of countless systems. By allowing randomness, we’re letting off steam to prevent disasters from building up, and we’re inviting the possibility of lucky accidents, some of which never
would have been able to be engineered deliberately. I actually utilize randomness in music creation to the best of my account - I try to make unpredictable musical events happen by unorthodoxly combining different elements, and then ‘catch’ the result that is inspiring and novel. I am inclined to believe that the combination of a low-entropy, flow-encouraging mindset and exposure to random musical events is a fruitful model for creativity.

**Method**

In this chapter, I clarify the form and range of the research, and present useful terms and perspectives in relation to analysis.

**Why artistic research?**

Research can be conducted in a myriad of ways, using different hypotheses, methods and theories. In my research, I aim to reveal tacit tendencies in my socio-musical work. To document and unveil silent knowledge and methods in artistic work is a common strategy in artistic research (Arlander, 2014). The direct access to the experience of artistic practice is in my opinion what truly distinguishes artistic research from other research. By zooming in and out of the musical work, I can (hopefully) ask relevant questions and illuminate intangible textures in my practice, and observe tendencies that probably would have been hard to identify with an entirely outside perspective. The folk musician and researcher Susanne Rosenberg (2013) makes an analogy with the experience of *being in* the water in contrast with *observing* water - there is a certain knowledge that can be gained through direct experience of water, and not just knowing the physical properties of water. This can be translated to artistic research - by being in the water, e. g. inside the artistic process, certain questions can be articulated, concepts delineated, and unique observations can be made. This is a significant strength with artistic research.

Sloboda (1995) notes that perhaps the only way to capture what goes on in a composer’s mind is by real-time observation of the music creation, in conjunction with the composer articulating all their ideas and thoughts in the process. A problem is that this possible method is that it may be triggering an observation effect - the act of formulating every idea can lead to disruption of the composition process (Bennett). A second problem with the outside perspective is the ability to make sense of artistic work. If you as a researcher are left with a ton of data consisting of artistic statements, how are you to interpret this material if not
through an *artistic lens*? By this regard, it seems a big advantage to as an artistic research scholar have direct access to the intentions and motives through my reflections on my work.

Research into the arts should in my opinion play the same rules as the arts - with all its ambiguities and many facets, speaking to the artistic sense. By this logic, the more inspiring and aesthetically thought-provoking the research, the more useful it is. The notions of *truth or empirical validity* just are not relevant to artistic research. If the reader *connects* with my results and reflections, that makes the research useful.

Theorist Henk Borgdorff writes that ‘art practice qualifies as research if its purpose is to expand our knowledge and understanding by conducting an original investigation in and through art objects and creative processes’ (Borgdorff, 2006). This statement has been informing my methodological choices, and draws on the importance of setting out with a research mindset instead of just creating non-reflectively. With my artistic observations and outside social and psychological viewpoints, this research can hopefully result in valuable knowledge on co-writing.

**Co-writes – method description**

To explore and uncover socio-musical tendencies, I have conducted six co-writes. There have only been two people involved in each co-write,\(^2\) and the amount of time and effort has been varied throughout the several co-writes. In none of the face-to-face co-writes was there a defined goal or plan beforehand - in fact, I did not demand that we would write any songs at all. This had a clear reason - I wanted to set out with as few restrictions as possible in the co-writes, because I normally start musical collaborations with clean slates. If certain research methods would have largely shaped the co-writing environment, then the research would not have connoted *my general artistic practice*. On the other hand, I recognize that the inevitable research elements in the collaborations may have shaped the sessions in some ways.

**Five of the co-writes has been conducted face-to-face in real time**, roughly resembling what Bennett (2012) describes as ‘Nashville co-writing’. My assumption was that by performing co-writes where people would be interacting in real time, the social aspects of co-writing would become salient and notable. No specific roles were assigned to participants

\(^2\) I worked together with three people in one co-write, but only communicated with one of the other two songwriters.
(i.e. ‘producer’, ‘songwriter’, ‘musician’), and the decision-making was set out to function in a laissez-faire and open manner.

I invited my co-write participants partly because I was artistically intrigued by them - they created music and concepts that had stimulated me in the past. Another reason for my choice of partners was the ambition to create a diverse array of people in the collaborations in terms of for example gender, musical expertise and genre specialty. My belief was that a spread in attributes among participants would result in many possible socio-musical situations - and in turn, a greater width of observations in the research.

Moreover, one co-write was performed asynchronously. In this co-write the style, form and purpose of the project was articulated beforehand by my collaborator. Here I was requested to write and record a topline - lead melody and lyrics for voice to a previously produced track.

Every co-write were performed in a studio, and computers and digital studio software were used in all co-writes.

The co-writing participants

Aside from me, five of the six collaborators are current or previous music students from The Royal College of Music in Stockholm (KMH). These co-writers have also worked professionally with songwriting and/or music production. The last collaborator which have not studied at KMH, is also not acquainted with music production or songwriting, and only has experience of performing music. Out of the six collaborators four of them were men, and two women. I knew all the participants prior to the co-write, to varying degrees.

Material collection and transcription

The material for analysis consisted of several components, and the data gathering was in large part inspired by the methods of compositional documentation proposed by David Myhr (2017). Three of the co-writes was documented in video and audio - i.e., every session in these three co-writes was captured on video and in sound. By having this material, I could then inspect the actions in the sessions in close detail in the transcription and coding phase. Additionally, the video documentation could allow me and my co-write partners to fully delve

Joe Bennett delineates the songwriting model asynchronicity (2012) - where songwriters work separately but without assigning roles. In my co-write, participants worked separately but with pre-defined roles.
into the artistic process but still being able to make sense of the sessions research-wise. If I would have interviewed my participants during the creative process, problems mentioned above discussed by Sloboda (1995) could arise - being forced to frequently formulate one’s artistic thoughts could risk to interrupt and alter the practice of co-writing. Though forced articulation of ideas may be creatively stifling, luckily it can be a natural occurrence to speak one’s thoughts to communicate ideas in co-writes, and the articulation may thus rather not be an imposed but meaningful activity for co-writing. As Bennett (2012) notes, these communicative aspects of co-writing make the method evidence-gathering without any infringement on the creative process.

Aside from video and audio documentation of half of the co-writes, immediate post-hoc reflection followed every session from my part. This included artistic, social and emotional reflection in light of the sessions.

Furthermore, I conducted and recorded semi-structured interviews (Davidson & Patel, 2011) with three of the co-write participants that focused on the collaborator’s social and musical experiences in the co-writes. In the co-writes where no interviews were conducted, communication about the collaborative process was documented in memos (small notes). These consisted of i.e. reactions to song drafts that were sent between participants, judgements about our respective song after playback etc. These memos are purely documentative of communication before, after and in between sessions, and not reflective or introspective. The memos accumulated into large documents over time - one document for each co-write.

To sum up - every co-write included post-hoc reflection, and aside from this, the documentation of the different co-writes were varied in methods (see figure 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song of Doom</th>
<th>Post-hoc reflection</th>
<th>Session video</th>
<th>Session audio</th>
<th>Semi-structured Interview</th>
<th>Communication memo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This is Us</td>
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<td>Anastacia</td>
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<td>Cinematic Ballad</td>
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<td>Humble funk</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Fantasy</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 - The leftmost vertical column specifies my working titles for the co-writes, and the uppermost horizontal column enumerates documentation methods. Green cell = the method in question was applied, red cell = the method was left out.
Coding and categorization

Here follow descriptions of the different methods for documentation and analysis that was applied in the project.

Transcription of session videos

The session videos were transcribed in order to get a fine-grained picture of musical and social actions during the recorded co-writes. When an action was performed, I registered the time mark of the corresponding action in the log, and described what was said or done (see figure 3). In these transcriptions, I use the term action to mean something that is of relevance to the social and/or musical interplay between the co-writing participants. If I deem that an action affected the social and/or musical process, then it is relevant. The notion of relevance is of course a matter of perspective - Mats Börjesson (2003) notes that how one categorizes and mentions different phenomena depends on a myriad of factors, including power relations, political position and expertise. I set out with a perspective that focuses on social and musical actions that impact the co-writing process. The selection of relevant actions in the sessions, is actually a crucial part of my research. To observe what impacts my work is to reveal my tacit knowledge of co-writing. This amounts to an adequate artistic research activity.

Figure 3 - My co-write participant’s name is here replaced with ‘NULL’ in order to conceal their identity. The colored tags are social and musical action categories, which are explained in the ‘action categories’ segment.
Action categories

Categories can help to make sense of events or actions and to view these occurrences in a systematic and meaningful manner (Börjesson, 2003). Categories can also be productive - by categorizing, models and theories can start to develop.

My observations in the gathered material gave rise to certain action categories. These categories emerged out of the fact that I noted patterns in the actions that occurred throughout the co-writes. Close to every spoken sentence, musical activity or other action that I deemed to affect the co-writing process could be put in either one or several of the action categories. Though useful for this project, the categories are not thoroughly definite, and are subject to improvement in future research projects. The categories were applied in the analysis of every documentation method in this project - i.e. in the session video transcripts, in interviews, post-hoc reflections and in the communication memos.

These categories also seek to illuminate a discourse in co-writing, to clarify which tools co-writers use to communicate, and which rules and implicit norms that guides the interactions. The categories also include gestures and movements (Backlund, 2006) and other non-linguistic actions.

Artistic Grit (AG)

This category denotes purely artistic actions, in the sense that a participant is doing something that can be directly implemented into the music. It can for example be to try out a vocal phrase, to jam on a keyboard or to write lyrics. In these co-writes, this often amounted to making sounds of some sort. The Artistic Grit actions can also be more technical ones that concerns production and mixing - for example to add reverb to a guitar track.

Concept

Statements that describe or discuss artistic visions can be placed in the Concept category. For instance, a sentence like ‘I want the verse to slowly build up to a climax in the chorus’ can be placed in this category. The result is described in more or less abstract terms, but how the result will be achieved in musical or technical means is undefined in these suggestions. Instead of a statement that uses musical language, concept actions also include narrative, more ‘poetic’ suggestions or multi-modal descriptions. An example of a narrative concept action can be to articulate a series of scenes unfolding in one’s head, and a multi-modal description can be to suggest that the bass should ‘feel like a ray of black light’. The concept
actions are not just describing something that is already composed in the music (see Meta),
but are aiming towards progression in the work, like artistic suggestions. The actions are often
not definite expressions of a co-writer’s will, but more like a discussion-starter for how to
continue with the musical work. Suggestions of emotional states in the music is also placed in
this category - i.e. ‘can we write a melancholic song today?’. The Concept category is
distinguished from Artistic Grit in that concept actions cannot be directly applied to the
music. Note the difference between the following statements:

1. ‘It would be cool with the verse starting with ‘I’m out of my head, and down on my
   knees’’ - Artistic Grit

2. ‘It would be cool to display desperation in the start of the verse’ - Concept

The lines between Concept and Artistic Grit can get fuzzy at times, but the two categories can
serve as a useful rule of thumb for analysis.

Meta

When we are talking about the music and/or the artistic process, we are in the Meta action
category. These actions confirm the work, and does not suggest any improvements to the
music, but rather appreciates or describes what has already been done. These statements are
also often value judgements, or displays of likes or dislikes. The value judgements have
influences from the Concept category, since approval or dismissal of certain musical actions
can guide the process to new destinations.

Aside from value judgements, Meta statements can describe lyrics, melodies and sounds -
‘this melody is so expressive and heart-breaking’. It can include reactions to production
details, like a scream after an unexpectedly loud sound, or by referring to something outside
the room - ‘this piano sounds just like my grandma’s!’.  

External

Actions in co-writes that seemingly does not relate to the artistic process are External actions.
By talking, this can be to mention what happened to me at the subway, or to ask what the
other participants is going to eat for lunch. It can also be to procrastinate with social media on
a mobile phone, or to discuss the clunkiness of certain production software. This category also
includes technical problem-solving like trying to find a key command, looking for files on a
hard drive or installing the latest drum sampler. One might wonder why a ‘non-artistic’
category is used to describe artistic processes, and the reason is because External actions were common in this project, and may thus be vital in the understanding of my co-writes.

**Ethical considerations**

The participants were promised anonymity in the documentation, and are thus never mentioned by real name in this paper. Consent were expressed for all documentative activity in the project. In the attached medley of the co-writes, certain musical elements have been replaced in order to obscure the collaborator’s identity, since for instance vocal performances could be strong indicators of this. The replacement of musical elements has been done with caution in order to preserve the original intentions and sound of the songs.

**Results**

In the following chapter, every session is analyzed to reveal tendencies in the processes. Both action category tendencies and more detailed tendencies will be presented in the section, and the analyze material is comprised of material from video session logs, interviews, post-hoc reflection and communication memos.

**General action category analysis in co-writes**

In the video documented sessions, Meta actions were most common, although the distribution between Artistic Grit, Concept and Meta were close to even.
Figure 4 - distributions of actions between action categories. The numerical Y-axis amounts to number of actions throughout the session.

However, the individual sessions were immensely varied in their action category distributions. In other words, the distributions of actions in the video documented sessions did not accurately reflect the spread in individual sessions. For instance, in the co-write ‘Humble Funk’, AG (Artistic Grit) actions were by far the most common ones, and in the second session of the co-write ‘Song of Doom’, AG was the least frequent action.

Figure 5 - distributions of actions between action categories. The numerical Y-axis amounts to number of actions throughout the session.

In the two-session face-to-face co-write ‘This is Us’, External actions in the first session morphed into subsequent Concept and AG actions. In this co-write, the AG actions were
sparse in their distribution - almost every AG action were followed by Meta discussion and/or conceptual development.

The songs that were created in the video documented co-writes ‘Humble Funk’, ‘Song of Doom’ and ‘This is Us’ each resulted in approx. 1.5 minutes of musical material.

As stated in the method section, some co-writes were not documented by video. In the one-session face-to-face co-write ‘Anastacia’, the reflection and co-write interview state that Artistic Grit actions dominated the first half of the session, while Meta and Concept actions were more frequent at the end. Starting off, we performed a row of External actions like getting to know each other and listening to some music, and the Externalities soon morphed into AG actions rather seamlessly. The session then showed high musical productivity through jamming and reciprocal affirmation of musical ideas (AG-heavy). After many musical parts had been established, the co-writers reached a level where individual pieces needed to be assembled and re-evaluated. The co-writers experienced that this level in the process was much harder than the initial ‘musical flow’, and both noted that they wanted to sew together the parts in solitude. The reason they articulated for this was that they both sought to go into a ‘editorial trial-and-error frenzy’, and try out a myriad of options instinctively without communicating their ideas.

In the co-write ‘Cinematic Ballad’, which included two face-to-face sessions, Concept was by far the most salient and frequent action according to post-hoc reflection and communication memos. In this collaboration, my co-write partner was not musically educated, and had no experience of songwriting or music production. Instead of expressing artistic urges through musical terms, they referred to a narrative - for instance, instead of mentioning verse, pre-chorus and chorus, my co-writer pictured that a story unfolded. I then interpreted the narrative arch that my collaborator was creating, and could thus set up a form for the song. My co-writer’s propensity to express all their artistic urges through Concept actions, led me to translate these urges into musical (AG) actions. The absence of formal musical norms and biases from my co-writer led to novel ideas, but the process of interpreting their impulses were also frustrating and felt unattainable at times. Furthermore, this co-write was as much social bonding as it was songwriting, which resulted in long sections of External talk. These parts of the sessions were experienced as totally non-artistic, whereas in other co-writes, the External actions were clear precursors to AG actions. The overweight on Concept and External actions led to fairly low generation of musical material per session.
‘The Fantasy’ differed from the other co-writes in many regards - this was an asynchronous collaboration where the roles and goals were pre-defined, and roughly the whole production was finished by the time I was invited to the project. I wrote a topline for the song in solitude, and sent drafts regularly to my collaborator. Not many Concept actions were articulated in our communication since we did not discuss narrative or construction of the topline to any great extent. In construction of the lyrics, I thought about the context of the song and who the narrator (singer) in the song was, and thus performing quite a few Concept actions. The bulk of actions from my side in this co-write was AG actions though. When I composed the topline, I almost exclusively tried out melodies and lyrics throughout the whole sessions without much conscious deliberation. Although the experience was that I almost exclusively performed AG actions, each session produced relatively little musical material. I recall that the AG actions never escalated into a long string of subsequent actions, but rather that the AG actions were forced and not inspirationally conceived. This was the only co-write that produced a finished product, and where my experience was that I could not performed better under given circumstances.

**Action category summary**

Although AG actions were more or less weighty in all co-writes, Concept and Meta actions were the most salient throughout all collaborations. With exception to ‘The Fantasy’, all other co-writes each resulted in 1,5 to 2 minutes of music. The bulk of the musical material in each song was created in the first session of each co-write. Therefore, the length of the songs did not vary much between the co-write that consisted of three sessions, and the co-writes that included only one session. None of the face-to-face co-writes resulted in what the participants deemed to be finished songs.

**Co-writing tendencies**

During the analysis, several recurring and influential tendencies in the co-writes emerged. The tendencies consist of events and actions in the co-writing processes. Here follow descriptions of the tendencies, and their consequences in the collaborative work.

**Grit Escalation**

This tendency describes a situation where a songwriter performs several AG (Artistic Grit) actions that follow each other in a fast and intuitive manner. These actions are also resulting into a piece of music, or developing existing music. The situation is characterized of ‘being
immersed in the process’, and the songwriter does not stop and reflect between the AG actions. It is likely that a person inside Grit Escalation is experiencing flow, a sense of total awareness and effortlessness in creating. The tendency also involves an inspirational momentum, where the AG actions lead to new inspiration, and thus resulting in a creative snowball-effect.

Figure 6 - 'Grit Escalation'

In the co-write ‘Anastacia’, Grit Escalation occurred as soon as the collaborators started to create - a rapid flow of musical ideas from both participants which could be directly implemented into a song. Both parties created simultaneously during the Grit Escalation, one by singing and the other by creating and mixing percussion. The co-writers both responded to the other’s impulses, and they both utilized their expertises. Both participants also expressed appreciation for the resulted music. Before the first session, the participants sent inspirational music to each other, underpinning references for the co-write.

In ‘Humble Funk’ on the other hand, the session largely consisted of AG actions but did not involve Grit Escalation, since so few of the actions resulted in development of the song. In the reflection, I express musical hesitation throughout the session - although we decided on certain musical elements, none of them felt robustly convincing and did not inspire new AG actions. As stated in an earlier section, while both of the participants sounded throughout almost the whole session, my experience was that we did not communicate through the music.
Grit Escalation is also correlated to performing a chain of AG actions without conceptualizing or rationalizing. In the co-write ‘Song of Doom’, almost every action was followed of discussion (Concept actions) or articulated affirmation (Meta actions), and thus, Grit Escalation did not occur.

Judging by reflection, interviews and session logs, the co-writers experienced a sense of musical fulfillment when Grit Escalation occurred. In the post-hoc reflection of the ‘Anastacia’ session, I describe it as ‘a perfect equilibrium of flow of ideas and catching the right ideas’.

**Socio-musical Nurturing**

External and Meta actions related to social bonding seems to prepare for creative collaboration. The co-writers began with getting to know each other in several of the sessions, and the shift from social bonding to musical work were sometimes seamless. Usually something in the initial ‘hanging out’-part of the sessions inspired an artistic idea which were later developed and laid the groundwork for the music. As a precursor to the co-writing in the research, interviews with professional songwriters were carried out. One of the interviewees stated that the ‘getting to know each other’ part of the session is *deliberately done in favor of the music*. The socialization seems to illuminate valuable information about the participant’s state of mind, and to define the musical ‘rules’ and norms for the co-write. This can be implicit, but not clearly articulated. Co-writes may also be just a reason for hanging out and not primarily a musical activity. In these cases though, the bonding parts of the sessions can be more consequently occurring throughout the co-write. In the case of Socio-musical Nurturing, the bonding part is often just a precursor to the musical work, and is far more salient in the start of the session.
In the co-write ‘This is Us’, the whole lyrical narrative was inspired by the participant’s initial conversation about heritage and identity. In ‘Song of Doom’, shared interests discovered through bonding set the conceptual scene for the song, and these concepts permeated every bit of the music - in everything from instrument choices, form, lyrical narrative and sound. The Socio-musical Nurturing seems to help the co-writers to find common ground, and to align their preferences in order to know what is good and bad in this room. In the co-write ‘Humble Funk’ where almost no nurturing took place, there was also a significantly low rate of idea affirmation. One reason for this may be that no references or concepts for the musical work were established - there were no artistic direction that had been discovered through Socio-musical Nurturing.

Concept Mountain

When a clear vision of the artistic concept of a song has been established, but no corresponding AG actions has been carried out, a Concept Mountain can emerge. Concepts can be very useful to communicate ideas, but they also place demands on the AG actions and can stifle creativity. For instance, say that you want your music to sound like a bathtub full of nuclear acid inside a terrarium. When trying to match this Concept with AG actions, no single AG action can probably suffice to represent the Concept. Therefore, in the extreme case, no single AG action seems good enough. In order to depict the Concept with music, a long chain of AG actions has to be performed, and only in the end of the chain is the conceptual idea
accurately represented. When the conceptual demands are as high as to seem impossible to achieve through AG actions, it can feel as climbing a Concept Mountain.

Figure 8 - 'Concept Mountain'

The sense of achieving artistic goals can be important in order to maintain inspirational energy in songwriting. Concept Mountains can prevent the experience of frequent achievement, since it can take a long time before you reach the conceptual goal. In the co-write ‘Cinematic Ballad’, my co-write partner did not possess any musical language, songwriting or production knowledge, and thus expressed their artistic ideas through Concepts. My partner also quickly, after receiving some musical stimuli from me, visualized a detailed narrative and emotional atmosphere for the song. Their Concepts were highly elaborate from the start, which posed challenges for me trying to interpret these artistic inclinations through music. Relatively few musical suggestions from me corresponded to my co-write partner’s conceptual ideas, which led to a executive hierarchy - me trying to please the other participant. Although the Concepts were inspiring and at times useful, they occasionally felt impossible to satisfy through music. This situation in turn drained my energy, and instilled a feeling of failure.
Preference Derailment

If one participant approves of musical suggestions that they do not genuinely like, the music can successively derail from that participant’s preferences. One party can approve of suggestions for social reasons - to create the illusion of consensus, which keeps the atmosphere enjoyable. One can also approve of suggestions that are not aligned with their preferences to grant the other person decisive power in the co-write.

Figure 9 - 'Preference Derailment'

Another cause for Preference Derailment to occur, is that one or several parties in the co-write does not want to get stuck in the creative process. For instance, in the co-write ‘This is Us’, I created a beat in the middle of the first session. In the post-hoc reflection, I express that the initial beat felt rushed and did not really inspire further songwriting. Nonetheless I felt pressured to create something rather fast in order to maintain the social momentum, and not bore my co-write partner. In this case, I approved of my own AG actions because of social reasons, and this created Preference Derailment since a beat I did not really like laid groundwork for the song.

Occasionally, instead of trying to create something that I liked, my creative aim was to create something that I believed my co-write partner would like. This could also lead to Preference Derailment, since I sometimes presented musical suggestions that set the songs off in a
direction I did not appreciate in the first place. As stated in my reflection, I aimed to please my co-write partners, instead of being attentive to my own preferences.

Discussion

In this final chapter the results will be reflected upon and discussed in relation to previous research and theory.

Connecting through songwriting

My research suggests that communicating through musical actions creates a sense of musical fulfillment. In the co-writes in this project, mutual Grit Escalation has been related to both musical productivity and individual satisfaction. Although Concept and Meta actions have been the most salient throughout the sessions, AG (Artistic Grit) actions are correlated to the most inspired parts of the sessions.

The producer/songwriter interviews that was made as a precursor to the project support the notion of purely musical communication as fulfilling. They describe their best sessions as intuitive, approving, and that they have ‘felt’ the music collectively rather than discussed the development of the songs. No deliberate compromises or negotiation - just a weave of simultaneous creation and mutual approval. There is also a tendency that the social dimension if not vanishes, at least plays a significantly lesser part in the AG-heavy parts of the sessions. Rather counter-intuitively, the most striking parts of the collaborations did not include compromise and conscious deliberation, but rather collective instinctual behaviour. In my interpretation of the co-writes, collective flow and Grit Escalation created more artistic possibilities and higher productivity than would have been possible in solitary composition. Furthermore, when the co-writers each utilized their own expertises in simultaneous Grit Escalation, the result was significantly fulfilling in the co-writer’s experiences.

The intuitive, creative momentum strongly described above resembles Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of flow. A state of experienced effortlessness where everything seems destined to fall into it’s right place. Consequently, the flow model can help us to make sense of AG action’s role in co-writes. Flow is related to a balance between challenge and skill. If the challenge in a situation is too great, anxiety will come as a result. On the other hand, if the challenge is too low, the subject will experience boredom. In the co-writes in this project, the participant’s have been posed several challenges. One of the challenges is to create music that is inspiring.
Another challenge is to maintain a socially enjoyable atmosphere. In my post-hoc reflections, I declare that the balance between musical focus and controlling the social interplay has occasionally been exhausting. To constantly talk in order to prevent awkward situations, and to worry about the other participant’s satisfaction, has probably posed too big challenges in order to achieve flow. This is also related to the notion of psychic entropy - social care and anxiety can make the mind disorganized in order to achieve artistic fulfillment. My research suggests that social care can prevent flow and Grit Escalation if it has an overwhelming presence in co-writes. This social care can be articulated, or just in the head of participants. Furthermore, co-writers can be subject to a social evaluative threat, if they experience that their performance is being judged by other participants. As stated by Byron et al (2010), if a subject is experiencing that they are being evaluated, their creative capabilities diminishes.

My interpretation is that in sessions where mutual Grit Escalation and flow has occurred, thorough work has been done to align the participant’s preferences and the norms of the co-write beforehand. Drawing on philosopher Estelle Jørgensen’s (1997) notion of Musical spheres of validity, the co-writers had entered the same musical space before the musical work began. For instance in the flow-heavy co-write ‘Anastacia’, the participant’s shared musical references long before the session, and in the start of the session they performed several External actions including bonding and music listening. I experienced that no maintaining of the social atmosphere was needed after the External beginning of the session, since we were musically aligned at the outset of the songwriting. The socio-musical groundwork had been laid out through sharing of references and social bonding, which may have prepared for mutual Grit Escalation and flow. Another crucial feature of this co-write was that the socio-musical External actions were performed before the songwriting formally began. My experience was that no External small-talk or bonding was needed throughout the whole session, since we were, implicitly, on the same page musically from the outset of the process. Thus, the social interplay did not pose a challenge in the co-writing, and we could focus on the musical challenges of fine-tuning our skills to create something inspiring, and communicate solely through the music.

Drawing on Svedberg’s (1997) separation of the relationship vs. work dimension in group collaboration, the relationship dimension seems indispensable in the creation of fulfilling music in the co-writes. In the co-writes, this points to a musical relationship between participants. Recall that the relationship dimension asks the question ‘how important are the people in the collaboration?’. The people are utterly important in co-writing, since they dictate the value of the work with their musical preferences. If we are merely doing something
in a co-write but do not find it fulfilling, what is the point of it? My research suggests that creating a musical relationship through sharing of musical references and artistic connection, help the co-writers to communicate through music and reach flow rather than merely staying on a social level. This is summarized by the co-writing tendency Socio-musical Nurturing, where co-writers implicitly align their preferences and their musical selves through emotional bonding and reference sharing. Social and emotional bonding can be important to create a safe and non-evaluative space, and musical bonding can prepare musical connection between participants. My research also suggests that a focus on the musical relationship in co-writes also makes way for flow and Grit Escalation to occur.

This research raises questions for the evaluation model for co-writing (Bennett, 2012). The model poses a flowchart of handling musical stimuli - from experiencing the stimuli to consensus or rejection. My reading of this model is that the steps involved are carried out through conscious deliberation and discussion, aside from creating or experiencing the initial stimulus. Actions in the model like negotiation, approval and rejection are indeed socially connotated. These steps correspond to Concept and Meta actions in the co-writes, like talking about the music and arguing for artistic visions. These deliberate and socially connotated steps do not seem to correspond to the decision-making in flow and Grit Escalation though. When communicating through the music, there is no weighing of pros and cons of an idea, no negotiation, and no veto. The decision-making in mutual Grit Escalation can rather be seen as a rapid development of ideas where the actions between co-writers blend in to each other. The experience can be that evaluation itself vanishes, since there is no clear separation of individual actions.

Concept and AG (Artistic Grit) actions

A pressing issue regarding the co-writes is that of the relationship between Concept and AG (Artistic Grit) actions. The purely musical interplay described in an earlier section does not seem to fully suffice to create a good collaboration. In cases where AG actions had been performed at length to create musical material, Concept actions were needed to structure these actions. Decisions about form and disposition needed, at least in face-to-face collaboration, to involve Concept actions. In phases where editing and mixing was required, it was hard to maintain musical connection through simultaneous AG actions, for the simple reason that only one person can work at the computer at any given time. Though in the cases where I managed the computer in the editing phase, I sometimes felt inhibited by conceptualizing - instead of talking about what we would want to do (Concept actions), I experienced an urge to
just do. But this would have been only me indulging in an editorial frenzy without communicating, which I experienced as socially non-permissible.

This desire to just do in musical activity, is acclaimed by musician Nick Bottini in his book *Just Play: The Simple Truth Behind Musical Excellence* (2018). He argues that musical activity should be intuitive, effortless, and not shaped by external restrictions. Preconceptions and anxieties stifle creativity and musical excellence. In the reading of my results, when co-writers experience an urge to just do but feel inhibited by the social situation, it may be a good idea to work asynchronously for a time in order to get back into intuitive songwriting.

Conversely, as I experienced in the co-write ‘The Fantasy’ while writing topline in solitude, AG actions alone does not lead to flow and Grit Escalation. The topline had tight restrictions in style and form, which left little room for my intuitive creativity to run rampant.

To recapitulate, Concept Mountains are elaborate artistic visions that can seem difficult to translate into music. Through the lens of psychic entropy, too many Concepts can make the creative mind disorganized, whereas both the musical goal and the ways to get there can seem fuzzy. Judging by the co-writes, it can be fruitful to keep a continuous interplay between Concepts and AG actions to keep the Concepts in a reasonable range. Concepts can help co-writers to express certain ideas that are inefficient to imply through AG actions, for instance issues about form and structure. The research also suggests that Concepts are more productive when the authors have an at least vague musical idea that correspond to their Concept. In this way, the author pairs their Concept action with a musical idea to better achieve musical communication. For instance, one co-writer may feel that the lead melody should be hopeful (Concept idea), and demonstrates this by singing a phrase that loosely represent the feeling that they want to achieve. By doing this, the Concept author does not lay the burden of interpretation solely on the other co-writer, but instead invites them to a musical communication.

To problematize further, AG actions and Grit Escalation seem to be linked to fruitful randomness in co-writing. Recall that philosopher Nassim Nicholas Taleb acclaims the value of randomness, and that stifling it can deprive us of lucky accidents. When inside musical flow and Grit Escalation, actions are performed intuitively and not deliberately, which according to my research invites lucky accidents. When Concepts dictate the co-writing processes, fruitful randomness and lucky accidents seem to be absent. The structural and more ‘rational’ quality of Concepts, which are deliberate and can be developed through compromise, does not seem to leave room to randomness to the same extent as AG actions.
Problematizing the 'no-free zone'

Openness and approval of ideas is of essence in co-writing, according to statements from e. g. lyricist Pat Pattison. As an analogue, Malcolm Gladwell (2006) also draws on the importance of mutual idea approval as a key to improvisation theatre. When Grit Escalation and flow occurred in the co-writes, this correlated with mutual approval of ideas. But sometimes ungenuine approval of ideas led to Preference Derailment in the co-writes. As stated in my post-hoc reflections, I sometimes approved of ideas in the co-writes for social reasons, in order to maintain a friendly atmosphere. My research suggests that in order to hold the ‘no-free zone’ as a dogma for co-writing, the participants in the co-write need to be aligned in their preferences beforehand - and make effort to create a musical relationship, for instance by Socio-musical Nurturing. By aligning preferences, participants make sure that they are on the same musical page, and thus their suggestions will likely be genuinely approved of by the other party. It can indeed be said that it is important that the co-writers genuinely like the suggestions they approve, or Preference Derailment may occur, which in turn can stifle the creative process.

Conclusions in short

This research if anything implies that the socio-musical dimension in co-writes can be complex. The social situation can enhance creativity through Socio-musical Nurture, but it can also stifle creative activity through Concept overload and fear of personal evaluation. The most crucial parts of the co-writes has been moments of pure musical communication, with the absence of social awareness. In these cases of flow and simultaneous Grit Escalation, productivity has been high and mutual fulfillment in co-writers has been confirmed. The social activities that served the co-writes were those that prepared for non-linguistic and musical communication, with alignment of preferences and emotional bonding. Co-writes that were fully permeated with conversation and discussion did not instill a sense of fulfillment in the co-writers to the same degree as co-writes characterized by Grit Escalation.

Suggestions for further research

In this research project, I have mostly performed co-writes that did not include a clear goal or defined rules. The arisen questions and issues may largely be attributed to the way in which we co-writed, and co-writes with articulated purposes may pose different challenges and tendencies. I therefore encourage fellow students to document and analyse their work in for instance lead co-writing, where a defined reference is dictating the creative process.
A co-write research project concerning the social hierarchy and/or dynamics between participants would also probably be a fruitful area of investigation. Through a perspective of for instance gender studies, the question of how the musical norms in the co-write are shaped could be valuable to address. Who dictates what is *good in this room*, and how does that affect the co-writer’s actions?

It must also be added that this research only concerns six different co-writes, and I have probably missed a plethora of different social tendencies and situations that could have arisen in a different setting. This is a step on the way to make sense of the messy concoction that is the collaborative musical process, and more steps in any given direction are to be cherished.
References


